

## Theoretical Action in a Time of War: the Ethical Dilemmas of Reading Iraqi Women's Warblogs

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### Abstract

'What is your feminist ethic?' 'How do you connect with the bloggers?' 'Do they know you are writing about them?' Discussing my research with friends or at conferences I am often met with the question of 'Who speaks for who?' and 'why?' During my research with Iraqi women's weblogs I have found myself awkwardly connected to these ethical and politically charged questions. These questions point to complex relationships between knowledge, intellectual processes and power. For Foucault and Deleuze (1977: 208) the concepts 'theory' and 'practice' are central to understanding the power relations the author or intellectual engages in. I argue that there are many stories being produced about the social environment in post-invasion Iraq, and that my story can be analysed as a particular theoretical practice.

### Introduction

'No, no one is 13 anymore...No one is 24 anymore... everyone is 85 and I think I might be 105' (Riverbend Thursday, August 21, 2003). Says Riverbend standing on the roof top of her Baghdad house, five months after the US led Invasion of Iraq. Riverbend is a young Iraqi woman who feels older than her 24 years and she is not alone in this experience. Young blogger HNK fears she is missing out on her childhood: 'I can swear that this war changes my life 80 -degree. I am 16 years old. I should live the happiest part of my life; I must be a crazy girl doing foolish and stupid things while I am not. I am talking like some one in 35' (HNK Friday, February 24, 2006). Young blogger Aunt Najma writes: I feel like a prisoner... I cant go out, and I can only do limited activities at limited times...Dad says it's too dangerous outside and we shouldn't go out for no important reason (Aunt Najma, Saturday February 10, 2007). 'We are waiting our turn to die' (HNK, Friday July 28, 2006). So 'What is the point?' asks Green Zone employee Neurotica. Is anybody listening? Are bloggers:

‘Empty Voices in the Wilderness’? (Neurotica, December 29, 2006). ‘I wonder’ HNK asks, ‘will you really dare to hear?’ (Monday, January 01, 2007).

Following the US led invasion and occupation of Iraq in March 2003, I began reading the warblogs of five Iraqi women: Riverbend, HNK, Neurotic Iraqi Wife, Aunt Najma and Faiza. Reading these weblogs enabled me to glimpse fragments of life in Iraq; particularly women’s experiences of the daily challenges of living in a war zone. I witnessed select fragments of the war, the variety of tragic and unfortunate ways in which people around the world were affected, shaped through the lens of technology. I found that the weblogs of Riverbend, HNK, Neurotic Iraqi Wife, Aunt Najma and Faiza disrupted the ways in which the invasion of Iraq was described in other discursive spaces, as a ‘war on terror’, ‘liberation’, ‘democratisation’ the search for weapons of mass destruction, ‘operation Iraqi freedom’.

Doing ‘fieldwork’ in the Iraq war blogosphere not only offers me different ways of understanding women’s experiences in Iraq, but different ways of understanding location, what constitutes an ethnographic field, how research can be conducted, and how I conduct myself as a researcher. Throughout my research process I have grappled with questions about the conduct of my research, how to account for the power I exercise as an author, how to account for myself and my interference in Other women’s stories. Discussing my research with friends or at conferences I am often met with questions regarding how I account for myself in such complex and shifting fields: ‘What is your feminist ethic?’ ‘How do you connect with the bloggers?’ ‘Do they know you are writing about them?’ These questions point to complex relationships between knowledge, intellectual processes and power.

In this paper, I argue that there are many stories being produced about the social environment in post-invasion Iraq, and that my story can be analysed as a particular

‘theoretical practice’. I discuss how, given the ethical dilemmas, the politics of my location, I can engage with Iraqi women’s weblogs. In understanding theory as practice I adopt a critical-reflexive attitude or *ethos* that acknowledges the subjective and mobile conditions of intellectual work. As a researcher engaging with Iraqi women’s weblogs, this *ethos* offers me a way of refusing judgement by engaging reflexively with my own intellectual practices. Judgement separates ‘the critic from the social world’ leading to a withdrawal from praxis; whereas virtue is a process that involves reflexive self-shaping exercises as part of the theoretical practice (Butler 2002: 2). My purpose in this paper is to inquire into how my ways of knowing are limited and shaped by the modes of thought I engage with: feminism and Foucault.

### **Watching the Lurker: the critical attitude**

Whether blogging, writing or ‘lurking’ we are all tethered to specific terrains, even if they are multiple, malleable and shaped by global communication technologies. The ‘limit-experience of the Western world’ shapes my knowledge and the ways in which I understand fragments of the bloggers lives: work, education, family, Islam, women’s rights. In this section I discuss how a particular critical attitude Foucault outlines in *What is Enlightenment?* can be used to analyse my practices as a researcher and enable me to know the ways in which I am presently governed as a writer. I analyse how I am tethered to certain *fields of possibility*, modes of thought, theoretical spaces. I use Foucault’s concept *fields of possibility* as a metaphor to trace my theoretical practice across complex and contradictory fields.

*Intellectuals and Power* was one of many spaces in which Foucault attempted to understand his own position of power as an intellectual (see also: *What is an Author* and *What is Critique?*). With Deleuze he discussed the relationship between

*knowledge* and *power*, and what it means to do intellectual theoretical work. Foucault argued that for knowledge to function as knowledge it must exercise power. Power in intellectual work is connected to the idea of the author-as-truth-teller. In many frameworks that shape the practice of theoretical work the author attempts to speak objectively by removing her or himself from the work, leaving only ‘facts’ or ‘truths’. Donna Haraway (1991: 189) calls this removal of the author a ‘god trick’ which entails ‘seeing everything from nowhere’. For Foucault, knowledge and power are of the same will, what he calls a ‘will to power’. Foucault (1977: 208) argues that whether the intellectual pursues knowledge or power, he or she still desires and exercises power. It is part of the intellectual’s task to interrogate this position of power, to resist being transformed into an object and instrument in the sphere of “knowledge,” “truth,” “consciousness,” and “discourse” by understanding theory as *practice* (Foucault 1977: 208).

In this sense, the concepts ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are central to understanding the relationship of power between the author and knowledge, and how it can be re-constituted. Theory and practice left unchecked attempt to segregate *thought* and *action*, when it is in fact the case that the intellectual governs theory through their own practice. The intellectual is the locus of power relations that shape the intellectual product: intellectuals ‘don’t revise a theory, but construct new ones; we have no choice but to make others’ (Deleuze in Foucault 1977: 207). Theory is the outcome of intellectualised *practices of self* – practices of choice in limited discursive fields.

I locate my theoretical practice as occurring in particular, partial and fragmented *fields of possibility*. These fields are transitional locations for practicing theory. Some of the fields I engage with are digital and significantly enabled by Iraqi women bloggers, and others are shaped by the intellectual dialogue of English speaking authors. I have

identified Feminism and Foucault as fields which I situate myself in/between. It is the details of these fields, the *technologies of the self* – encouragements, incitements to act and know oneself in a certain way – that give some, albeit shifting, shape to my thought processes, my theoretical action. By problematising the ‘rules of action’ and ‘modes of relation to the self’, I encounter in these fields I can locate the particular ways in which I am encouraged to know myself and establish some ground on which I can stand – even if this ground is shifting and problematic (Foucault 1997: 319).

The particular, critical attitude I adopt can be located in a series of lectures, essays and interviews Foucault participated in towards the end of his life (1997b: 32). I propose that this critical attitude can be of particular use to me in understanding how I am shaped as an author by encouraging me to reflect on the arbitrary constraints, the limits and possibilities, that have led me to constitute myself as a subject of what I am ‘doing, thinking, saying’ (Foucault 1997: 315). Of particular significance is Foucault’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’ in which he discusses a type of philosophical interrogation ‘one that simultaneously problematises man’s relation to the present, man’s historical mode of being and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject’ (Foucault 1997: 312). This type of interrogation, Foucault argues, is rooted in the Enlightenment as an attitude, an *ethos* that is the ‘permanent critique of our historical era’ and of the ‘consciousness that we have of ourselves and our past’ as social products (Foucault 1997: 312, 315). Foucault argues that this type of ‘historico-critical’ investigation allows us to ‘separate out from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think’ (Foucault 1997: 315-316).

Foucault’s critique takes the form of a ‘critical ontology’ of self, which encourages critical engagement with processes of self shaping, a ‘historico-practical test of the

limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings'. With this framework in mind I analyse the limits and possibilities of the fields that shape my thought processes and the ways in which I choose to shape myself in order to understand the limits and possibilities of my engagement with the historical present. The *attitude* or *philosophical ethos* that Foucault supports describes, 'an awareness of self creation, of our own history as it unfolds...an awareness of the contingency of reality, including the contingency of one's self-understanding' (Taylor and Vintges 2004: 281; Foucault 1997: 285). Through this type of critique I can recognise myself as a subject *in process*, continuously shaped by my own actions. Through 'experimental' work I can define the technologies, the encouragements and incentives that have shaped me, to better choose/refuse the ways in which I want to think, act and behave (Foucault 1997: 316).

Foucault describes this critical practice as an attitude: 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling...of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task' (Foucault 1997: 306, 309). In this sense, 'there is something in critique which is akin to virtue' (Foucault 1997b: 25). Virtue is a an attribute or a practice of self – a way of practicing critique: 'it belongs to an ethics which is not fulfilled merely by following objectively formulated rules or laws...[but] a critical relation to norms...a specific stylisation of morality' (Butler 2002: 6). Foucault's politics and aesthetics of the self suggests a mode for theoretical action that is neither static nor prescriptive: the practice of the self is a practice of choice in limited fields, an ongoing process of reflexive self-shaping.

### **In/between Feminism and Foucault**

Any feminist ... drawn into sending love letters to Foucault would be in no danger of reciprocation. Foucault's work is not the work of a ladies' man (Megan Morris in Elliot 2007: 101).

Fashioning a voice and forming a position while engaging with feminisms and Foucault takes place in spaces of tension. Moving in/between Foucauldian and feminist discursive spaces, I encounter, use, or exclude a variety of tools that help me to develop a vocabulary to discuss and analyse Iraqi women's different embodied experiences, choices, and actions. My purpose in this section is not to reconcile or respond to the many feminist critiques of Foucault, but rather to show how the *ethos* Foucault outlines enables me to identify and question the limits of the fields I engage with, the limits of both feminism and Foucault. Given the constraints of this paper I can not outline the many and varied feminist engagements with Foucault. I will focus on one of the key debates opened up by feminists Meredith (2005: 4), Miller (2000) and Ransom (1993).

The *woman*, as subject, is central to the feminist project. In order to produce a recognisable women's identity and discuss women as individual and collective subjects with certain rights, similarities have been drawn between women's diverse experiences (Morgan 2006: 5). In order to rewrite women into the history books and society at large many feminists have relied on the validity of 'women's experience' as authentic, truthful accounts of reality. Such truth-telling practices are produced and function within a framework that privileges the concept of *patriarchy*. Patriarchy, understood as: 'a universal and historical form of oppression...an institutional structure of male domination', provides many feminists with an all-encompassing theory for identifying 'gender-related forms of female subordination by men' (Rowbotham et al 2006: 52). The female subject and the concept of patriarchy

provided the grounds from which women could speak *truthfully* about their own experiences, and develop ways of being that challenged the androcentric organisation of society and social systems.

Given the inherently political nature of feminism, developments that have occurred in and across feminist endeavours are complex and diverse (from the first to the third wave). In the late 1990s diverse accounts of women's experiences and identities – from third wave feminists and postfeminists – began to destabilize the utility of a coherent feminist identity and problematise understandings of the category 'woman' (Miller, 2000). The problematisation of women's voices and identities was considered by some a problematisation of the liberatory project of feminism itself, leading some feminists to ask who feminism speaks for and how *woman* can be understood. In the recent past these challenges 'have come to dominate feminist discussions...cutting deeply into assumptions of solidarity, testing appeals to sisterhood to reckon with the differences between women, within "woman"' (Valverde 2004: 67).

In Meredith's (2005: 41) view, woman's search for a place from which to speak is hindered by the endless questioning of the very foundations upon which feminism has built many of its arguments: poststructuralists 'attempt to tear the mimetic contract to ribbons and exile 'woman' to the hinterland of undecidability, while simultaneously striving to retain political agency in the deconstructive-nominalist maze: for where is feminism if 'woman' does not exist?' (Meredith 2005: 41). Meredith (2005: 42) accuses post-structuralism of exhibiting a devaluing, dehumanising, anti-humanist, anti-women sentiment, detracting from the category of 'woman'. The post-structuralist critique of subjectivity 'seems to deny the idea of agents capable of making change. In short, post-structuralism appears to leave nothing to struggle for and no one left to make the struggle' (Nicholson 1997: 318). Within the

poststructuralist, deconstructivist maze, the key question becomes: ‘how can a politics of resistance and emancipation be possible if knowledge is pre-determined by those conditions we seek to emancipate ourselves from, and situated in an environment of control, surveillance, discipline and domination?’ (Ransom 1993: 151). In the matrix of Foucauldian discursive fields and power relations, truth, liberation, and emancipation are relative. Feminists seek ‘value-affirmative’ stances that express personal politics (Miller 2000: 323).

These are but a few of the tensions that feminist authors who engage with Foucault have mapped out. I suggest that these tensions can provide productive spaces for theoretical practice. Between these fields I encounter a variety of tools to discuss and analyse women’s different embodied experiences, choices, and actions as *empowered*. Consider, for instance, Miller’s (2000: 322) concerns with the multiplicity of Foucault’s truth and the relativism of emancipation. In these in/between spaces, where Miller (2000: 332) and others see hidden determinism, I see *possibilities, choices, practices, and shifting locations*. Where Ransom (199: 151) sees discipline as a cage I see the permanent *agonism* of the subject in process, of the constant, ceaseless *negotiation of power relations*.

My key argument here is that power can be negotiated through practices of the self – self shaping exercises. I suggest that practices of the self can be understood as practices of choice – even if these choices are restricted by patriarchal or oppressive circumstances. Through this formulation I imagine choice as embodying power and freedom, but in a particular way. The freedom to shape the self can be understood as already inscribed in the fields and technologies of the self we engage with. Freedom has become ‘technological’: ‘articulated into norms and principles for organising our experience of our world and of ourselves’, it exists ‘in certain ways of exercising

power over others' and 'has been articulated into certain rationalities for practicing in relation to ourselves' (Rose 1992: 3). Being aware of the many ways in which power can be negotiated provides women with the possibility of refusing to be governed *in that way*, or *like that*. This is not just a conversation of/with power 'it is a way of limiting and controlling power' (Foucault 1997: 288). This critical formation of the self provides the grounds for a different reading of Foucault's subject as being more than just the over-determined effect of power relations.

The way that I understand freedom and choice as part of being or *practicing* a self, speaks to my enactment of choice in limited, particular discursive fields. By engaging with the technologies, rules and injunctions that shape my voice in certain discursive fields, I have attempted to show how speaking with multiple voices does not have to lead to immobility and theoretical stagnation. Feminisms and Foucault can both play a dominant role by contributing their strongest attributes for different theoretical practices. Foucault's latter work expands my ability to 'think and act critically, within a context of uncertainty and contingency, in ways that facilitate new, nonoppressive forms of commitment and responsibility' (Taylor and Vintges 2004: 2).

## **Conclusions**

It is a powerful, critical act to write one's story in a time and space that is simultaneously violent, chaotic and digitally-peaceful. Power can be seen in the practice of the self that each woman's blog enables: each practice a choice and each choice calculated. It is the ways in which the bloggers – HNK, Aunt Najma, Neurotic Iraqi Wife, Faiza, and Riverbend – have lived through war and occupation and accounted for their experiences that has motivated me to keep writing my thesis, especially when I was asked time and again in conference discussions if I *should*. I

have been consistently encouraged by the women's demands for their voices to be heard above the chaos, violence and uncertainty and their determination to live their lives with optimism and courage. As a fragmented story with its own digital currency, my theoretical practice is a way of carving out a space in which I can know myself as an ethical being in academic fields.

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